

Young People and Trauma

Young people exposed to trauma such as violence, death, accidents, or disasters are likely to show signs of stress. Young people are likely to exhibit some of the following symptoms. If symptoms do not decrease in severity after a few weeks you are encouraged to seek professional assistance.

Common Reaction of Young Children and Pre-adolescents

- Nightmares and night terror
- Nervous behavior
- Worry over safety of loved ones
- Confusion
- Irritability
- Physical complaints
- Changes in eating or sleeping
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Poor concentration
- Suppression of emotion
- Attention to adult reactions
- Repetitious play
- Difficulty separating from parents
- Fears about safety
- Question how this could be done
- Magical ideas related to event
- Exaggerated startle response
- Reenactment of events in play
- Bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- Excessive fear of the dark
- Fear of being alone
- Outbursts and tantrums

Warning Signs: When to seek Professional Help

- Any substance use or abuse
- Extended periods of depression
- Ongoing loss of interest in daily activities
- Acting much younger for extended periods
- Excessive imitating of the dead person
- Statements about or acts of self harm
- Ongoing wish to join the dead person
- Withdrawal from friends
- Sharp drop in school performance
- Refusal to attend school or major events
- Dramatic change in eating and/or sleeping
- Violent or threatening behavior

Parents and Caregivers Can Help

- Provide assurance that he/she is protected
- Hold, hug and touch your child often
- Give honest information at their level
- Be tolerant of symptoms of stress reactions
- Spend extra time, especially at bed time
- Attend to concerns expressed in art or play
- Help identify, label and express feelings
- Acknowledge normal feelings and reaction
- Watch for and correct his/her self blame
- Be available and encourage questions
- Protect from exposure to unwanted details
- Develop and/or review safety plans

What You Can Do For Others

Take care of yourself first; then you can help others.

- Listen carefully.
- Acknowledge any feelings are normal now.
- Be sensitive to individual circumstances and different points of view.
- Don't take emotional responses, like anger, personally.
- Respect an individual's need for privacy. If someone doesn't want to talk about the incident or their feelings, don't insist. Reach Out at Work
- Organize support groups at work to help one another.
- Offer a "listening ear" to someone who hasn't asked for help but may need it.
- Give encouragement, support, and understanding with on-the-job issues.
- Identify resources for additional help (the Employee Assistance Program, local AA and NA meeting schedules and locations, and others as needed).
- Be alert to behavior changes with respect to the use of alcohol and other drugs as a means of coping with stress and grief. Helping Family and Friends
- Offer to spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for the family.
- Respect the person's need for privacy and time alone.
- Encourage contact with available help (EAP, community resources, support groups, and alcohol and substance abuse organizations).
- Keep communications open; be available and accessible.
- Be alert to behavior changes with respect to the use of alcohol and other drugs as a means of coping with stress and grief.

Older Adults: Stronger Than Sorrow

"I was in the army and saw a lot of bad things in World War II, but this is different. It seems like we're helpless against this kind of thing."

--Sam

Almost everyone felt a loss of safety after the Oklahoma City explosion. Now, after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, we again feel vulnerable. Some people may have trouble sleeping or began to have nightmares. Others may feel uneasy about going downtown or into large buildings. If you are feeling less safe these days, it can be very helpful to talk about what frightens you. Discuss your feelings with a trusted relative or friend. You may find that he or she is having the same kind of feelings you're having.

"My daughter keeps fussing at me to eat, but my stomach's been upset a lot and I'm usually just not hungry."

--Virginia

Experiencing a disaster can make us feel ill. Nausea, body aches, headaches, bowel problems, and skin disorders often appear when we are under stress. Some people lose their appetites; others begin to overeat.

There are several things you can do to protect your health. Do take care to eat adequate and nutritious meals, to participate in recreation, and to get enough rest. If your doctor has prescribed medication, be sure to take it as directed, but never take other medicines without your doctor's okay. Avoid drinks that are high in caffeine, and stay away from alcoholic beverages -- they can make your health problems worse.

"If I were younger, I'd go and help. I want to, but I figure I'd just be in the way."

--Edward

We find as we get older that our strength and stamina are not what they used to be. It's frustrating when we can't just jump in and set things right, but we can still find ways to help. For example, being a concerned listener to someone who has been affected by the disaster is an excellent way to contribute.

"The devastation is so total. It just breaks my heart."

--Ann

In grieving for the people and property lost in the disaster, you may be reminded of other losses you have experienced over your lifetime. It's also possible that the disaster will bring back long-forgotten memories of other frightening experiences. If so, think about the skills you've developed that have helped you in other times of crisis, and use them now.

"I don't need anybody's help. I've always taken care of myself and my family."

--William

People who have survived war, the Great Depression, and other hard times have earned a reputation as self-reliant. But no one should cut himself off from others or try to "go it alone." Stay in touch with family and friends. Allow them to help and comfort you. Learn what your community agencies have to offer, and let them know if you need assistance.

"How long will it be before these feelings fade?"

--Margaret

There's no standard timetable for healing. Don't compare yourself to others. Just take care of your health, talk honestly about your feelings, make time for recreation, and stay involved with your family and friends. You will, in time, feel like yourself once more.

After Disaster: Understanding Traumatic Grief

Any disaster, whether natural or man-made, leaves us to grieve over our losses and adjust to a world in which our sense of security and control has been stolen.

Most adults have experienced feelings of grief, perhaps at the death of a family member, a significant decline in health, or a failed marriage. Children, too, at some point learn about the inevitability of loss. But when losses occur suddenly and traumatically, feelings of grief may be more intense, long-lasting, and emotionally disabling.

Traumatic grief is especially severe among those who are directly exposed to a disaster. People close by when the event occurred often find that mourning is made more difficult by their memories of painful sights, sounds, and odors at the scene. Often, those who are grieving behave as if they are numb; this is a way of "putting up one's guard" to avoid being emotionally overwhelmed.

Waiting to learn what has happened to a loved one involved in a disaster adds to the anguish. So do the ongoing media coverage and intense public interest; they make it hard for mourners to "get some distance" from the tragedy and begin to work through their painful feelings.

When a traumatic event is caused by the deliberate act of another human being, the grief of those affected is often mixed with feelings of rage at the cruelty and injustice of the attack. People who have been victimized want to find out who is responsible, understand the motive, and see that the guilty are punished. Thoughts of revenge are normal, but too much of this kind of thinking can delay the healing process.

Sometimes, individuals experiencing traumatic grief are bothered by memories of their last contact with their loved one -- regretting, for example, that they parted in an angry or indifferent manner. It's common, too, to be haunted by the "empty spot" left in the family or work group and to focus on the fact that the person who died will no longer be present at special occasions or will never again occupy a certain chair or perform a particular job. Feeling the "empty spots" is painful, but a necessary part of the adjustment process.

Both children and adults have strong responses to traumatic loss, although they may express them differently. For example, an adult may openly show signs of depression for many months. A child may seem sad only briefly, then return to usual play activity, and may even appear to be ignoring the family's loss. It's important to remember that children do grieve; they simply have different ways of showing it -- often with disruptive behavior, physical ailments, or impossible fantasies about the return of the lost family member or friend.

There are things you can do to help yourself and those around you through a period of traumatic grief. The first is to recognize that each person is unique. Children of varying ages have varied reactions. Each family member, coworker, or friend now must learn to cope with different roles and routines, and each will be challenged with his or her own special "empty spots."

Young children need to be told the facts honestly, but gently. Tailor information to the child's level of understanding, but don't mislead or allow the child to harbor misinformation. Give youngsters extra attention and reassurance during a period of grief.

Ask for help and advice with practical decisions related to finances, your job, and other concerns. Decide which things must be done right away and defer the rest until a less stressful time. Keep your focus on positive memories, rather than reliving the tragedy or thinking of future sorrows.

Limit exposure to news stories about the disaster if you feel they are delaying your recovery by keeping you "stuck" in a cycle of anger and grief.
Think about the coping skills you have depended on in other difficult times, and use them now.

Join a support group. There is comfort in sharing experiences, and strength in knowing you have helped others and allowed them to help you.

Things to Remember About Trauma

- Everyone responds differently to trauma. Try not to judge yourself or others. This is an important time to honor your own experiences, as well as those of others.
- Feeling is normal. Be cautious about using drugs or alcohol to suppress emotional pain. Share your feelings, don't hide them. For assistance contact the Information and Referral Hotline at the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) 1-800-522-5353.
- A traumatic incident may trigger memories of other trauma you have experienced. This is normal.
- Take care of yourself. It is important to rest, eat well, and exercise to relieve pent-up feelings and stress. Put unrelated stressful decisions on hold. Allow for time alone and with others, as you need it.
- A trauma in the workplace is serious. We may not realize how much a part of our lives our coworkers have become until something happens to one of them.
- While we may question the appropriateness of grieving at work, it is necessary in order to put closure on the incident.
- People grieve in different ways and those differences need to be supported and respected.

Experiencing a trauma or loss can lead to a reassessment of what's really important, an opportunity to make changes, and to be more appreciative of those around us. For many people, surviving a crisis can help build self-confidence, knowing you had the strength to manage through a very difficult situation.